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**Education Committee
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**HB 6881 An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes
Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators**

Good afternoon Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee. My name is Debra Field and I am a resident of East Hampton. I work as a Paraeducator in the East Hampton School district and have been for twenty-one years. I also proudly serve as a union steward for the paraeducators in my school district. I offer the following testimony in support of **HB 6881 An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators.**

Paraeducators are on the front lines of student learning. We provide one-on-one assistance to special education students, reinforce instruction, manage classrooms and support English language learners. Our duties are often legally required and indicated in students' IEP's (Individualized Education Plans). We celebrate with our students when they succeed and try to redirect them when they act out verbally and physically teaching them self-regulation strategies. Despite the tremendously important roles we play, paraeducators are among the lowest paid staff members in our schools. It is a financial burden to afford our healthcare and there is little chance we will be able to retire with dignity unless we supplement our income with second jobs. We don't get paid during the summer and we are not allowed to collect unemployment. It is not surprising that paraeducators are leaving the profession in large numbers, leaving more than 1,300 paraeducator positions vacant in districts throughout the state.

HB 6881 is an important step in improving the work life and career opportunities of Connecticut's paraeducators. However, most of all this bill is an opportunity to

begin to treat paraeducators with the respect and dignity we have earned.

As I previously mentioned, I have been a full time paraeducator in the East Hampton school district for twenty-one years. I began this position working at the middle school level and am now assigned to the high school. I spend my day working for the special education department both assisting one-on-one students and as a vital part of several classrooms assisting teachers, reinforcing instruction, and supporting IEP students. I am valued by the teachers I work with as I have a bachelors degree and many years of experience with the curriculum and students. As a paraeducator our days are hectic, breaks are quick or non-existent, flexibility is key as we are often pulled to cover others to meet legally required items in students' IEP's. I supplement my income to help make ends meet by tutoring students for the district after school.

Over the years my role with students has evolved as students' needs have changed. I continue to support students academically, reteaching classroom content, assisting with work completion, and giving support so students may be successful. However, now with the need for an increasing amount of student socioemotional support, I also assist with this arguably more important role as well. Many students rely on paraeducators as one of many emotional supports to get through the day. Many are not even IEP students—they are students who I have connected with in my classrooms. For example, one of my sons works with a student who graduated about five years ago. I used to talk with him on a regular basis as he was in a class and also a homeroom I was assigned to. He told my son recently that he probably wouldn't have made it through high school if it wasn't for me. I had no idea the impact I had on this student until my son told me this story. Some of my students' parents have approached me after graduations thanking me for supporting their son/daughter during their high school years. I am not sharing these stories to toot my own horn, but to show the magnitude of the impact that I and other paraeducators have on the students in our schools. I care deeply about my students' successes both academic and socioemotional, advocating for ending the stigma surrounding mental health issues, and even starting a student led mental health awareness club. Over the years I have been told that I care too much, but I believe caring is an important part of the job. Students need people as paraeducators who truly care about them and will go the extra mile for them. To attract and retain caring and qualified paraeducators (at least two years of higher education) districts need to start valuing us by paying living wages or candidates

will find other careers where they are valued. How many jobs do you know that require a higher education that do not pay a living wage?

In East Hampton paraeducators are included in some training and professional development activities, but not nearly enough to adequately prepare us for all of our job requirements. Money to provide us with this training is always an issue. Teachers are prioritized and paraeducators are often overlooked and not considered for participation in professional development days especially on days we would not normally be paid. We receive our mandated trainings, but not much more than this.

After twenty-one years of service I am currently earning \$24.62 an hour which translates to \$30,405.70 a year. For comparison, MIT's Living Wage Calculator indicates that a single person living in Connecticut would need to earn at least \$32,000 a year in post-tax income to earn a living wage. And if that is not bad enough, \$5,110 or 16.8% of my wages goes to pay for healthcare premiums for my husband and I. I am married and thus am not the sole provider, but there are others who are. I carry the household medical insurance, but would not be able to do so if I was starting off in my district now. Paraeducators are lucky in East Hampton to have the CT Partnership 2.0 plan for insurance. However, in 2017 during heated debate the district negotiated for newly-hired paraeducators to only be able to have employee-only health insurance (unless they paid out of pocket for family plans). In 2017 all new paraeducators were also required to enroll in a different pension plan (not a defined benefit plan). The town does save a large amount of money by doing this—but at what cost?? How many qualified people will not apply for or take a paraeducator position now if they are the ones carrying the medical insurance for their families (single-parents)? How many qualified people will not take the position or stay in the position because they do not receive a living wage? There is a high turnover rate in paraeducators. There are many positions that go unfilled state-wide. This effects the quality and consistency of the education of many of our schools' most vulnerable population—special education students. Something is terribly wrong with the system!

Don't get me wrong—I love my job! I would not have stayed in it for this long if I didn't. I am proud to be a paraeducator and I am passionate about impacting students' lives. Five years ago the high school yearbook was dedicated to me and I was honored to read the names of students at graduation. I was humbled by these

gestures of affection and acknowledgement of my influence on the lives of these students.

I am 62 years old and nearing the end of my career. I am giving my testimony not for myself but to fight for all the paraeducators who are currently working in our schools struggling to make ends meet as I have for years. I am fighting for those who choose this career path and should be justly compensated with livable wages, reasonable healthcare costs, adequate retirement benefits, and professional development opportunities going beyond mandated trainings. This testimony is also for the students who deserve passionate paraeducators assisting, encouraging, and guiding them on their paths to be successful, well-adjusted members of society. I fear many people will no longer remain as or choose to be paraeducators if something is not changed now! I have already shared that I often care too much. However, the real question isn't about how much **I** care—it is about how much **you** care! So, do **you** care? You have the ability to initiate a meaningful change. I implore you to do so; show that you care!

Now is the time for this committee and all the members of the General Assembly to take immediate and meaningful action to raise paraeducator pay, lower our healthcare costs, ensure we have adequate retirement benefits and give us the tools needed to help students succeed.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Please support student learning by prioritizing paraeducators and passing HB 6881.